20

CHAPTER II

000 WITHIN two weeks I was Mudeer, or 'Master' of the Fort, my predecessor, Bob Allison, having handed over to the satisfaction of us both and of the Regional Director. I had reason to remember the day before his departure. There were two parties; one at the Fort, given to R.A.F. and American friends, and the other at the sheikh's palace. We attended the latter first, assembling at the Political Officer's residence early in the evening for a drink and a smoke, comforts which we should have to forgo whilst under the sheikh's roof.

Captain Bird occupied a low-built, Moorish type of building on the shore of Sharjah creek. It had a pleasant trellised veranda running the full length of the house, and in the hot weather it was a great relief to sit there and enjoy the sea breezes. The only disadvantage was that one got the smells as well, the town being a short distance from the house. An enclosed courtyard, guarded by an immense door of decorated sandalwood, before which sat an Arab sentry, divided the residence into two parts; on the left was the residential and domestic quarter, whilst on the right were the Government offices.

Bird once told me that this arrangement, although extremely convenient at times, had the disadvantage of putting him at the mercy of clerks and official callers who pestered him long after the defined hours. Not that he was the type of man who sought to avoid work; but he was studying hard to acquire a mastery of the Arab language and script, and sacrificed most of his leisure to that end. With his only illuminant an Aladdin lamp, and the small, fanless room buzzing with flies and mosquitoes, he must have possessed exceptional patience to sit there, night after night, translating the caligraphic mysteries of the Koran. Occasionally he would drive over to the Fort in an old Chrysler to take dinner with us, but these visits, unfortunately for us, were all too rare.

576 782 It is considered bad manners to call on a Mohammedan between five and seven o'clock in the evening, because during this time, 'at the hour of sunset', as it is called, the faithful are called to prayer.

622 with a triple aggal of gold thread above his flowered silk head-dress,
291 or kufieyh. His sandals were likewise embroidered with gold thread, and he wore his ceremonial gold sword and curved *hangar*. His three sons, aged six, ten and twelve, were similarly dressed, whilst the nobles, although garbed more simply, managed to create an air of affluence. One marked difference was that the sheikh's beard was luxuriously oiled, combed and scented, whereas the beards of his courtiers were ragged, unkempt and rather dirty.

622 Closely guarded by a ruffianly gang of armed thugs, the sheikh,
342 after embracing us, took us into the inner courtyard. This was a plain, unfurnished room with a floor of black and white marble squares, where the sheikh, his sons, and the Khan Bahadur, an old
[516] friend of ours, whose name was Abdur bin Razzak, removed their sandals prior to entering the throne room. As Europeans entering an Arab house do not remove their shoes, it being considered beneath their dignity to do so (although in reality the practice has a religious basis and would, therefore, have no meaning for an infidel), we followed the royal party after divesting ourselves of our hats. These, together with our torches, we were advised by Abdur bin Razzak to keep in our possession, otherwise they might be difficult to recover afterwards!

[353] The throne room was a long, bare apartment with undecorated, distempered walls broken only by a frieze of the inevitable Moorish pattern. The floor was covered with exquisite Persian rugs, and at the end of the room were half a dozen chairs of Victorian Gothic design covered with purple cushions. It takes a long time to sit
516 down in an Arab house. It is customary for the host to make the pretence of motioning the guest to a chair; the guest is expected to refuse the invitation and, in turn, to motion the host to his own chair. When there are several guests, this absurd ritual of gesticulation can continue for several minutes. Eventually the sheikh settled himself in the largest chair, or throne, and we arranged ourselves in order of precedence on either side of him. Since Captain
000 Bird was the only one who spoke Arabic at all fluently, and Abdur bin Razzak the only Arab present who spoke any English, conversation with the sheikh and his sons had to be conducted through these two intermediaries. I have often suspected later that the eldest son, Abdul, had quite a useful command of English, but he never showed the slightest sign of understanding a word that we said. When I got to know him better, however, and found out

2: O'Shea G-3 (1944-1945) 1947 MK4 Trucial Oman MK4

what a cunning little monkey he was, I was more circumspect in the remarks I let drop to my friends in the sheikh's presence.

During a formal visit of this kind the conversation inevitably begins with remarks about the weather, the state of one's health and other commonplaces, and by degrees veers to more practical subjects until, eventually, the subject one really wishes to discuss is delicately touched upon. Certain matters, such as references to women and religion, should never be mentioned, unless one is really exceptionally intimate with one's host. Unsuspecting visitors to Arabia frequently cause offence in this manner. It is also considered bad manners to ask too many questions, even on matters in which one may naturally be very interested, such as Arab customs and tradition.

Experience is the only guide in such things, and one learns in time the correct way of phrasing a sentence to which the required answer will be courteously given, without being too gauche or direct. I am afraid that Allison and I broke the rules rather badly on this occasion, for we rained innumerable questions upon the sheikh through our able interpreter, Abdur bin Razzak. Yet I often wondered afterwards whether this very able diplomat did not discreetly change the questions into honeyed words of flattery, for the sheikh seemed as pleased with our catechism as we were with his replies! Among the subjects discussed were locusts, Persian rugs, wheat supplies, the price of goods from India, the numbers of aircraft we were expecting that week and in the future, and the prospects of the date crop.

Throughout this conversational session (a customary preamble to a meal), we were aware of being closely scrutinized by the other guests, who, together with the ruffianly guards, stood impatiently in the courtyard awaiting the signal to go in to dinner. We were presently joined by a young Arab of dark, almost negroid complexion and features, with an elaborate scarlet turban, which reminded us of the robber king's head-dress in *Chu Chin Chow*. After making a low obeisance to the sheikh, he permitted himself to be kissed on both cheeks before retiring to a chair. This young man, I was afterwards told, was the heir to the Kalba sheikhdom, but, being under age, the affairs of his land were managed by the Regent, a relative of the sheikh's.

A story of typical Arab intrigue surrounded this young prince. His father, the sheikh of Kalba, had been murdered by a rival sheikh who had his eye on the fertile valleys and date plantations of

2: O'Shea G-3 (1944-1945) 1947 MK4 Trucial Oman MK4

consisted of an enormous pile of boiled rice on the top of which lay a greasy carcase of mutton, liberally besprinkled with oil and grated almonds. 264

At a signal from Sultan bin Saqr, the other nobles seated themselves around the floor on their haunches. A negro slave approached with a silver bowl, a tablet of soap and a ewer of warm water. We held our hands in the bowl, lathered them with soap and, when the slave had poured water over them, dried them with a small towel which he provided. Sheikh Sultan then tore a choice piece of mutton into pieces with his bare hands and placed morsels of it on our plates, an action which in Arabia is considered an honour and distinction.

The mutton was exceptionally greasy and fat and I had some difficulty in swallowing it. It tasted much more appetizing when dipped in a bowl of curry, or eaten with chipatti or one of the spiced dishes. The rice, although somewhat oily, was the best part of the meal, as it was richly sprinkled with almonds and raisins. There were numerous other side dishes, such as *fagar*, a kind of truffle, mushrooms in sauce, little puff-balls of batter filled with cream, figs and dates in sweet syrup, pink iced biscuits and cheese made with goats' milk. Since it was polite to make a hearty meal, we were obliged by courtesy to sample most of the dishes and to consume all the morsels which the sheikh kept putting on our plates. All around us the nobles were belching loudly and smacking their lips with gusto, and we were expected to do the same.

I could not restrain a smile when my mind suddenly slipped back to the memory of a very sedate dinner party I had attended in London a month previously. Yet, for all their noise and somewhat barbaric outward satisfaction, their manners were in their own fashion perfect; they held the food with their fingers with extreme delicacy, and were most expert in the art of rolling meat and rice into an oval wedge so that it slipped into the mouth with ease. They, in their turn, must have been amused at our clumsy efforts to emulate Arab manners, and I am sure that I dropped more rice on the precious Bokhara rug than went into my mouth.

At length the sheikh, with a final belch, rose to his feet, signifying that the meal was ended. Thoroughly gorged, we followed suit, and allowed the slave to wash the grease from our hands. Returning to the throne room, we were handed tiny gilt cups into which a slave poured black mocha coffee flavoured with cloves. 264 272 576

2: O'Shea G-3 (1944-1945) 1947 MK4 Trucial Oman MK4

264 576 272 It is considered good manners to drink coffee noisily, indicating satisfaction, for coffee-drinking is a rite with the Arabs. Not less than three cups should be taken, after which one shakes the cup to signify that one requires no more; if this pantomime is not undergone, the slave will keep on filling up the cup until the pot is empty. Usually the arrival of the coffee pot is accepted as a sign that the visitor should shortly take his leave, but on this occasion it appeared that Sultan bin Saqr desired our company a little longer. The slave reappeared with a silver censer, which he proceeded to swing under our noses; the smoke of the burning frankincense filled our nostrils with its sweet fragrance and was most pleasant.

000 When eventually we took our departure, shaking hands with all the nobles in turn, the whole party trouped off to the gateway to see us into our car. The sheikh muttered a blessing: '*s'Alla maleikum*', or 'Allah protect you', and we sped off into the night, feeling about as bloated as city Aldermen after a Lord Mayor's banquet. A short drive across the desert brought us to the Fort, where we found our guests awaiting us, and had to face the formidable prospect of another dinner. However, as it was an eventful occasion, we managed to face up to it and do justice to the admirable meal which Lambert and his cooks had produced. For once there was plenty to drink, bottles appearing like magic from beneath the table. The party was a very merry one, with a great deal of singing (particularly from the jovial Irish officer, Captain Pat. Tandy, who was to replace Bird as Political Officer), and a great many speeches, including a humorous one from Bob Allison, my predecessor.

After Allison's departure for Karachi, affairs on the station continued to run smoothly, except for the torrential rains which flooded the desert and held up our aircraft. It was almost a joke to me to visit Flying Control each morning and inquire when the runways would be fit to use. I could see for myself that only a flying-boat could have landed on them in their present state, but officially I had to obtain a verdict from the R.A.F. authorities and signal a statement to the stations *en route*. At length this got so monotonous that I despatched a message to the effect that the runways would not be serviceable for at least two weeks. Two days later a message came from Karachi: 'Can York land at Sharjah to-morrow?' When one realizes that, apart from the impossible condition of the airfield, a York aircraft requires a run of at least

[Shi'hou]

576 The woman whose fiendish caterwauling had brought the wrath
562 of the tribe down on our heads, now appeared decently veiled, a large metal bowl in her hands. This was passed round the circle, each partaker making a sucking noise as he drank. It required some courage to put one's lips to the bowl after it had been licked by those bearded ruffians, but the camel's milk it contained was cool and sweet. A dish of dates, covered with flies, was next produced, and out of sheer politeness we helped ourselves to a small portion. They tasted of fermentation and were full of grit.

415 While we were seated with our strange hosts I looked around the
316 hut and noticed several pots and pans, very crudely made of a yellowish metal. Lifting one of these up, I handed it to the headman and indicated with a gesture that I should like to know what it was made of. The old man pointed to the mountains and grunted '*ga'ar*', which I found out afterwards was the *Shi'hou* word for gold. Apparently there are considerable veins of this mineral in the hills; it is smelted by the tribesmen who sell a proportion of it to the lowland Arabs, but also use it for their domestic utensils. Tin is also mined or washed in the streams.

576 When we could stand no longer the heat and stench of the hut we stood up and indicated to the headman that we should like to leave. He grinned very affably and, taking us by the hand, led us across the valley towards the crevice. The tribesmen followed, shouting and laughing and firing their rifles into the air. When we reached the top of the crevice we shook hands all round, a custom which they appeared to understand, and then thanked them in Arabic for their hospitality, which they did not understand, but which seemed to amuse them nevertheless. Just before we left them the headman unclasped his silver *hangar* from his waist and presented it to me. I have it still.

000 Our descent down the mountainside was much quicker than our ascent had been. We could hear the tribesmen's rifles cracking away in the valley, and feared that they might suddenly change their minds again and begin firing at us. Fortunately no untoward incidents occurred, apart from Stanton losing his foothold and falling twenty feet down a sharp escarpment, thereby skinning his arm from wrist to elbow. Within half an hour we had reached the base of the foothills and could see the Khan Sahib's house in the distance. The time was now five o'clock and I realized that the rest of the party would be getting somewhat impatient.

We found the Khan Sahib pacing up and down his beautiful

she pleaded that no man had been near her that night. On being questioned, she admitted that she had stopped to gather some *fagar* on the way home, darkness had fallen and she had lost her way. She had spent the night most respectably, sleeping under a neam tree. (To understand this incident, it should be explained that the *fagar* is a kind of edible fungus, much liked by the Arabs, and that in shape it curiously resembles the phallus.)

The trackers employed by the Sheikh of Sharjah were reputed to be the cleverest in Arabia. That afternoon I had gone for a walk to the Sheikh's Wells, a delightful spot about two miles from the fort, whence we obtained our water supply. The area is covered with flower and vegetable gardens, and guarded by one of the round stone watch-towers which one finds on the outskirts of most Arab towns. The Sheikh and his Ministers arrived in a smart Hudson automobile, followed by the Khan Bahadur, Abdur bin Razzak, in his sedan. They were met by two trackers on camels, and proceeded to hold a conference.

Fifteen minutes later the trackers set off for the hospital, picked up the tracks of the raiders, and were soon galloping off in the desert at a smart pace in the direction of Baraimi. This is a small market town in the middle of a trackless desert. The territory is not claimed by any sheikh, although several have tried to possess it. For hundreds of years it has remained neutral ground, and its famous date plantations represent the only example of co-operation among the tribes, for each has a share in the crop. Baraimi is not only a centre for the slave trade, but is a refuge for criminals.

We heard later that the raiders had been traced to Dhaid, but that the trackers had been unable to arrest them. They were in hiding with about a hundred other brigands, and there are limits to the courage of a tracker. Compensation for the thefts was paid to the R.A.F. authorities, and it was a rather curious fact that, several months later, sheets and blankets, bearing the R.A.F. tabs, were found in local houses.

Desert raiders are usually the 'bad boys' of their tribe, and their conduct does not always reflect the character of the tribe as a whole. Some tribes pride themselves on their honesty and deal very sternly with offenders. If a tribesman of the Beni Qitab is caught in the act of stealing or raiding, the Sheikh Mahomed, the patriarch who rules this tribe, will make himself personally responsible for the thief's apprehension and punishment. This may take the form of amputating the right arm, branding, or the more barbarous punish-

and dunes of soft sand, but the approach is through a cool grove of palm trees, with gardens on either side. The houses and streets are neat and clean, the town being planned in four sections in the form of a cross. Each section is surrounded by gardens and palm plantations, with a high fence of palm leaf matting to shield it from the dust and wind. Raschid may be a wily rascal but he understands the basic principles of town planning and his town is an example of what can be done in the desert.

The desert track ended just outside the town, giving way to a wide road with a hard surface, suitable for any type of car. Green palm trees waved on either side of the road and the air was full of the song of birds. The bazaar lay to our left, on the seaward side, but we skirted this and rode straight ahead towards the palace. This is a large, imposing building, with great buttresses and cliffs of honey-brown sandstone rising straight out of the sand. Architecturally, it is one of the finest forts in Oman, with ramparts and crenellated towers resembling those of the crusaders' castles at Acre. The two large towers, facing south, and the bastions are of seventeenth century Portuguese design, and the pitted, battered walls are evidence of the turbulent history of this desert outpost, for the people of Ajman were once the most warlike of all the tribes.

We dismounted outside the main gateway, where Raschid bin Hamid, Hussein and other members of the court were waiting to greet us. This gateway, cut in a side wall, is small and rather insignificant, but no doubt it was built thus for strategic reasons. There is a larger gate on the west side, heavily barred and studded with brass nails, set in a thirty-foot wall, but this is never used. To the left of this gate the wall is overhung with a large veranda, with grilled and fretted windows; behind this lie the women's quarters and the harem.

There are some remarkably fine cannon outside the fort, varying from small bronze culverts of Portuguese origin, to twelve-pounders of Crimean vintage, still suspended on their original wooden wheels. The muzzles of small brass cannons bristle from the loopholes in the walls of the fort, but their use is purely decorative. An air of decay pervades the huge building and the sandy plaster is falling from the walls, but even in dilapidation it is extremely picturesque.

Sheikh Raschid shook hands and then embraced us in the Arab fashion, brushing our cheeks with his bearded lips, which smelt of perfume and tobacco.

2: O'Shea G-3 (1944-1945) 1947 MK4 Trucial Oman MK4

had lunch, but it was not possible to decline the dishes placed before us. In the centre of the dining-mat was a huge bowl of rice and steamed sheep, very fat and oily; chipatties, truffles, curry, sheep's liver, and pastry puff balls filled with honey. The sheikh presented me with a large piece of fat with his own hands, and I felt sick before it had entered my mouth.

After the meal we again washed our hands and sat drinking out of little brass cups of bitter coffee. Cigarettes were produced and all smoked except the uncle from Baraimi. The conversation, as is customary during social calls, began with polite enquiries after one's health. Raschid then recounted some of his experiences in the hunting field, and sent his son to bring a pile of fine gazelle skins, trophies of the chase; one of especial beauty and fine marking he presented to me, together with a pair of horns. The wazir, Hussein, looked as though he were tired of the conversation, and produced a blackwood reed from the folds of his *abbas* and began to play a wistful little tune. Abdul bin Hamid sang in a high-pitched voice and we sat back on our cushions and listened. The tune was monotonous and without melody, but it had a weirdly fascinating rhythm.

The sheikh, whose tales of the hunt were thus rudely interrupted, grew restless; he belched aggressively and pulled at his beard. At length, losing all patience, he rose abruptly and signalled us to follow him through the courtyard. Hussein went on playing his melancholy tune, so we wandered through the fort with Raschid and his daughter. Scores of ragged children came into the courtyard to stare at us; they were nothing to do with the sheikh, unless they were children of his servants, and he took no notice of them. With his twinkling blue eyes, humorous mouth and hawk-like nose, he might have been an Eastern king, benevolent and wise, surrounded by his subjects. He had perfect teeth, stained at the edges by tobacco, and on his finely-shaped hand wore a large cornelian stone, engraved with an account of his descent. The Arabs do not as a rule have a crest or heraldic design, although some of the sheikhs display a badge, usually in the form of a crescent or sometimes a bird or lion which is engraved on seals and the backs of chairs.

Raschid on this occasion wore a very barbaric-looking turban of white and purple Kashmir wool and looked more like a pirate than ever. When we had seen over the fort, many of the rooms of which were completely bare, he conducted us to the stables

The headman[1], a fine-looking old Arab with a white beard and keen eyes, came forward to greet us and introduced us to the local gentry. 516

They shook us by the hand, the kiss of honour being reserved for Sheikh Hamid alone. Salim bin Raschid, the headman, amazed us by declaring that he had anticipated our visit. When we enquired how this was, he merely shook his head and smiled. The only explanation I can give is that some servant of the Residency Agent's at Sharjah had passed the information to a friend, and that the news had been conveyed to Djaidh by a passing caravan. The argument against this is that the decision to make the journey was only made by Captain Tandy the day previously, although he had discussed it with Jasim.

The headman allowed me to take a photograph of him and insisted on shaking my hand again when I had done so. The Arabs do not shake hands vigorously, as we do, but in a gentle, feminine way, letting the tips of their fingers linger in your palm. Accompanied by the notables, we inspected the wells, where stalwart young negroes at once assumed an air of great preoccupation and began hauling at the winches and emptying the full baskets which came up. We peered down the well and could just see the heads of the labourers working in the channel. The headman said they had just cleared the well base after a heavy fall of sand, and had increased the height of the roof to eight feet. He assured Tandy that the work was making good progress and that he would be personally responsible to the Sheikh of Sharjah for its continuance. 312

We spent half an hour at the wells, where Tandy and Williamson engaged in technical discussions with the Arab engineers, and then took the road leading to the Beni Quitab encampment. No one seemed to know quite where it was, except that it lay towards the lower slopes of Jebel Faiyah, and was about twelve miles distant. Salim lent us a couple of guides, who clung precariously to the running board as we plunged across the river bed and sped up the steep, grass-covered banks. Here we entered a country which looked very much like the veldt of South Africa; in fact, just the sort of terrain in which one expects to find lions. 487 133

This country, called by the Arabs *Marbakh abu Laila*, extends at the foot of the mountains from Muraq-qibat to Baraimi, a distance of nearly a hundred miles, and is about ten miles in width. It is completely wild, the haunt of gazelle, hares, mountain wolves and occasionally the rare, long-horned oryx. It was here, many years ago, that Williamson shot a leopard, an animal which previous 487 133 136

1 [at Djaidh -- Amlyst]

415
291
2721
●576

Soldier, guide and statesman — but above all a connoisseur of the art of coffee-making. Good manners require that a guest sip down three cups of the bitter, black brew.

To
369
162
439
443
[181]

ladies' lingerie, but he has little use for some of the strange products of the West. For the townsman, who is living in a mixed community of Arabs from many parts of the Persian Gulf, Persians and Indians, it is a different proposition, and his materialism has made Dibai a small British export area, though mostly for the less refined goods that are unable to find buyers on a more discriminating market.

B
101
186
721
661

The primitive bedouins who live by the foothills of the main mountain range, who owe allegiance to no one, are a constant cause of worry to the sheikhs, from whom they extract levies in return for protection; if the money is not forthcoming they raid the villages and carry off goods, camels and children. On the whole, however, the people of the coast seem to have a peaceful enough existence, making their living by, among other things, pearling, fishing and boat-building.

TO
361
396
226

To
312
•576

At several points along the coast the wells are some distance inland, and water has to be transported to the villages by camel or donkey. Though brackish and unpalatable, it is expensive; the cost of buying water is a burden on the poor, and they take only sufficient for their minimum needs. Even so, the water-pot is always at hand when a traveller passes by — a simple hospitality that is often very touching. The lot of the dogs, a wretched one at the best of times in the

000

P. 191 (B)